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Book Reviews

The Outlines of History. By H. G. WELLS, two volumes, pages 648 and 676. Macmillan Company. \$10. 50.

In 1914 it was said of Mr. Wells that he was jealous of the war. Apparently in an effort to satisfy his jealousy he has glanced over the history of mankind and has found abundant cause for dissatisfaction and discouragement. His history is to be written in the same spirit as Tacitus wrote his *Histories*, "neque amore et sine odio," and one must confess that he has succeeded in maintaining an impartial attitude just about as well as Tacitus did. Christ and Confucius, Muhammad and Buddha are all to be placed on an equal footing (I, 573). They are all to be treated fairly but firmly. These are volumes to which any one may turn, no matter who his hero is, and there find him shorn of all his glittering reputation. "Pericles is a Greek demigog (I, 345), a political statesman rather of the calibre of Gladstone and Lincoln." As for the latter, Gladstone is a "man of profound ignorance" (II, 429); Lincoln is subsequently alluded to but once (II, 443), where a single line tells his history. Alexander is a "precipitate wrecker of splendid possibilities" (I, 510). Julius Caesar is "an elderly sensualist or sentimentalist" (II, 13). Of Napoleon Mr. Wells writes as the Romans (except Nepos) wrote of Hannibal. The man who conceived the battle of Austerlitz and the campaign of Paris is to Mr. Wells "not so intelligent a leader as Moreau or Hoche" (II, 374). In fact, he was "a scoundrel, bright and complete" (II, 375). All the good that he did would have happened without his intervention; all the wrong that he did is made lustily to live after him. Even his influence on the compilation of the Code Napoleon is minimized.

But it is with Mr. Wells' treatment of classical history that I am concerned, and to his representation of ancient culture I wish strongly to object. My objection is not that he drags to light every outworn scandal, especially scandals that are connected with sex relations; not that there are inaccuracies (e.g. the younger Scipio is called an adopted son of the elder Scipio, I, 477: "Men will treat the rough notes of Thucydides or Plato for work they never put in order as miracles of style" I, 360 (Mr. Wells has, of course, confused Plato and Aristotle! and Thucydides' incomplete history is no more "rough notes" than Macaulay's *History of England*); nor is it that I disagree with him in his judgment of historical values (e.g., the disastrous importance of the Punic wars, I, 468); nor in his portraiture of individuals. It is of course unfair in characterizing the elder Cato (I, 474) to lead the unsuspecting reader to believe that Cato left his horse in Spain because he was too cruel to bring him home; nor can anyone who studies the history of Julius Caesar seriously believe that debauchery was his principal occupation in life. My ground for objection is that Mr. Wells has failed utterly in giving his readers the correct perspective for the judgment of Greek and Roman culture. In the case of Athens particularly, his emphasis is on the shortcomings of Athenian democracy. He complains that the Athenians had slaves and that the women were not allowed to vote. Now when one remembers that slavery as an institution was abolished not very much more than sixty years ago; that it is hardly a

quarter of a century since women have been allowed to vote in any civilized country, one can scarcely blame the Athenians for not having reached this Utopian level.

Mr. Wells constantly harps upon the absence of mechanical inventions. The failure of the human race to conceive the printing press fills him with great sorrow. To this he recurs again and again; and finally when the Alexandrian period is reached, he is so disgusted that he gives the reader an elaborate picture of the facilities which he himself has for writing his history, contrasting it with the meagre equipment of the Alexandrian scholar, and suggesting a familiar piano-player device which the Alexandrians should have thought of for handling their rolls. In fact, more space is devoted to the glorification of the appointments of Mr. Wells' private study than is given to the Peloponnesian war and the American Civil war combined. When one contemplates the reluctance with which English civilization adopts labor-saving devices in the twentieth century, one feels that Mr. Wells should have a little more charity for Aristarchus' inability to envisage the motor driven roller of the piano-player. It is a pity that Mr. Wells could not have weighed ancient civilization in the light of what it did achieve and not in the light of what it could have done under his direction.

It is customary to speak of Mr. Wells' histories as if they were a wonderful performance. They do not seem so to me. Given a professional writer and an amateur philosopher (see *The Heart of a Bishop*, *passim*), assisted by a corps of readers, and guarded from mistakes by expert advisers, and the *Outlines of History* are an easy task. What would not one have given for an *Outlines of History* written by that "profoundly ignorant man," Mr. Gladstone!

Mr. Wells' *Outlines of History* has two distinct merits. His point of view is stimulating. By determining in every case not to accept the conventional view of an historical character or event, he stimulates the reader to aggressive dissent. In the second place, his history is readable, and that, in my opinion, is no small merit. Perhaps Cicero goes too far in saying that history should be written "*ad narrandum non ad probandum*." Certainly Mr. Wells' history is written *ad narrandum* (he himself admits that it is for the Hindus and the Moslems and the Buddhists, as well as for the Americans and the Western Europeans, II, 573); and perhaps the greatest thing about it is that it is actually being widely read. May I quote a single paragraph as a sample of Mr. Wells' incisive style?

"Wisdom passed away from Alexandria and left pedantry behind. For the use of books was substituted the worship of books. Very speedily the learned became a specialized queer class with unpleasant characteristics of its own. The Museum had not existed for half a dozen generations before Alexandria was familiar with a new type of human being; shy, eccentric, unpractical, incapable of essentials, strangely fierce upon trivialities of literary detail, as bitterly jealous of the colleague within as of the unlearned without, the bent Scholarly Man. He was as intolerant as a priest, though he had no altar; as obscurantist as a magician, though he had no cave. For him no method of copying was sufficiently tedious and no rare book sufficiently inaccessible. He

was a sort of by-product of the intellectual process of mankind. For many precious generations the new-lit fires of the human intelligence were to be seriously banked down by this by-product."

LOUIS E. LORD.

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